

Drawing-writing culture: the truth-fiction spectrum of an ethno-graphic novel on the Sri Lankan civil war and migration

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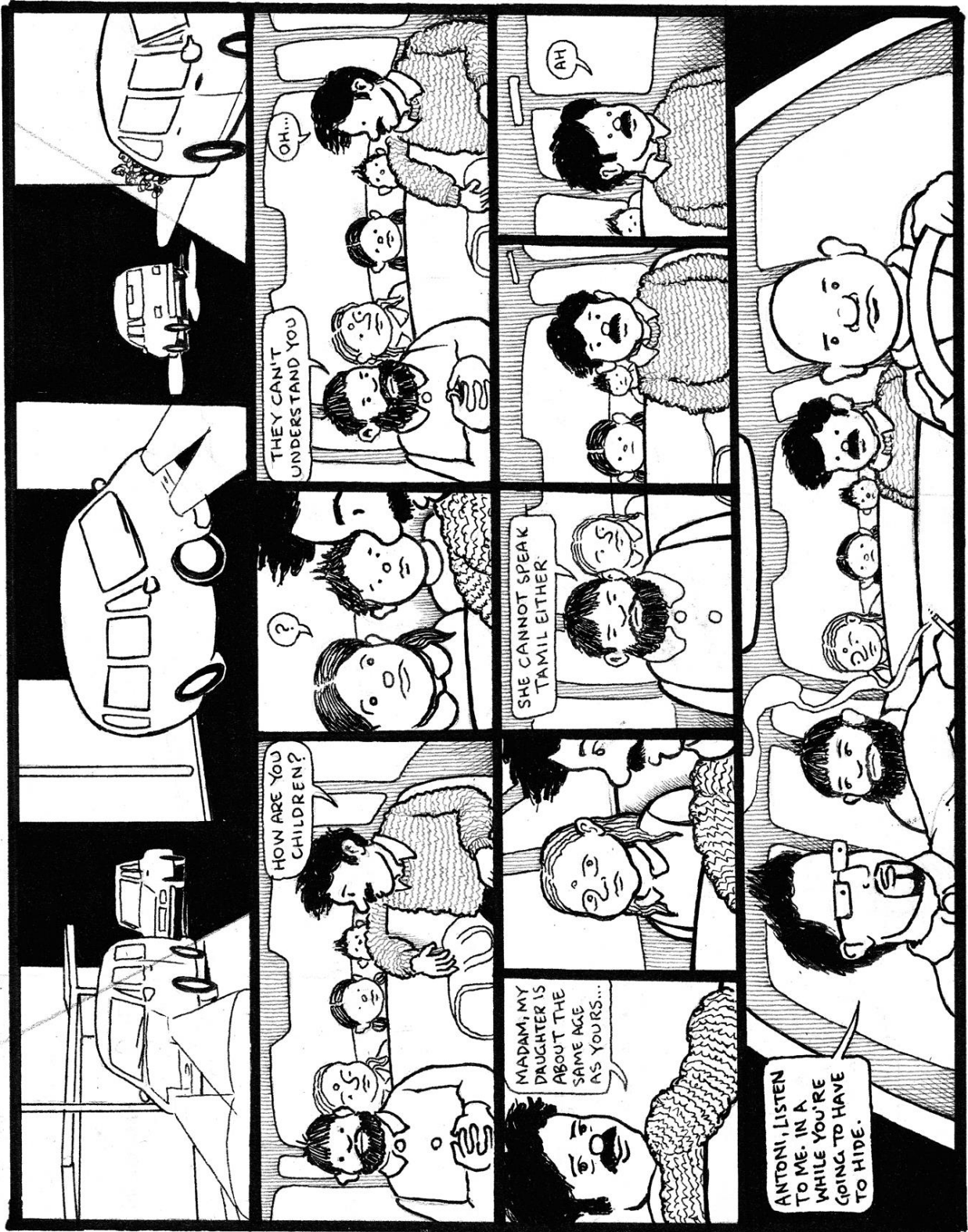
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Drawing-Writing Culture:

**The Truth-Fiction Spectrum of an Ethno-Graphic Novel on the
Sri Lankan Civil War and Migration**

Benjamin Dix and Raminder Kaur

with illustrations by Lindsay Pollock





ARE YOU READY?



OK

WE'LL DRIVE FOR ABOUT TEN MINUTES NOW. THEN WE'LL BE AT THE TUNNEL. THEY MIGHT CHECK THE CAR. DON'T HOLD YOUR BREATH IF THEY DO - BREATHE SHALLOW AND QUIET. IT WILL ONLY LAST A MINUTE OR SO.

SLAM

are you sure he'll be quiet

just behave naturally... disque ok

don't worry

VRRRRRRR

BUMP

OUCH

aiyo! quiet you fool - he'll get us all arrested!

antonio, it was a speed bump. try to be absolutely silent. in two hours you will be free.

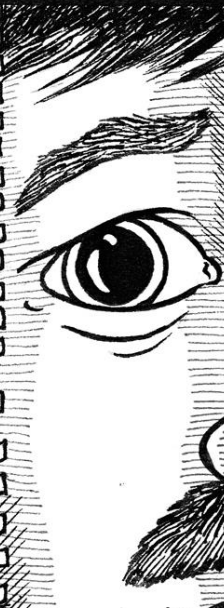
FREE... I WILL BE FREE ...IN TWO HOURS... I WILL BE FREE...

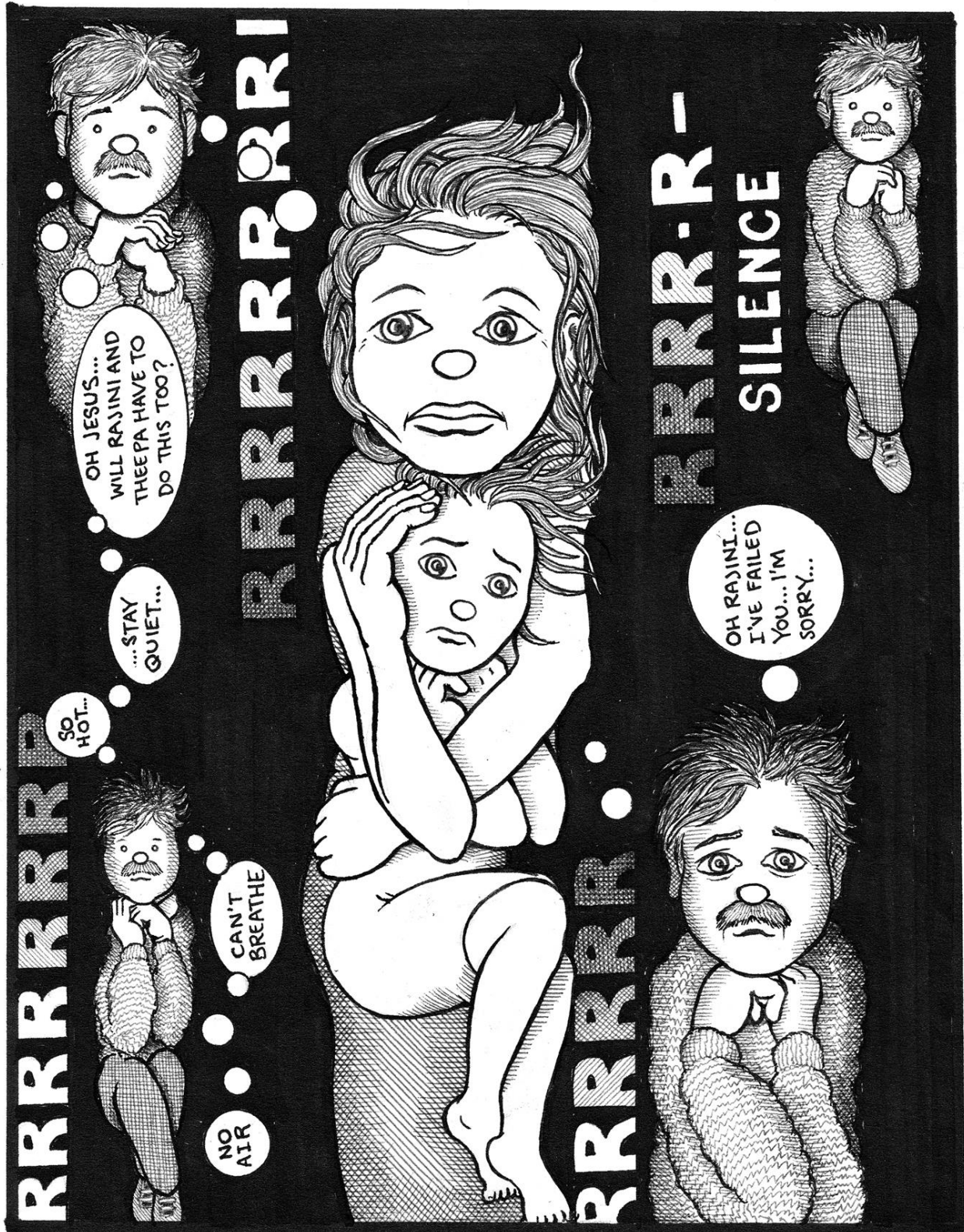
VRRRRRRR

WHAT AM I DOING HERE? WHAT IF THEY FIND ME? WHERE WILL THEY SEND ME? TO PRISON? TO INDIA?

TO SRI LANKA? OH LORD, WHAT IF THEY SEND ME BACK THERE?

RRRRRRRRRRRR





darkness...



silence...



and memories ... vivid memories like flashes, slashing...



not only in his mind

but in his body too, his back recalling



the cracking, snapping contortion from

, , wrists, tied too tight, behind

the blood retreating, defeated from dead, numb extremities...



and...

...time, turning to an infinite ocean, formless...
Silent...

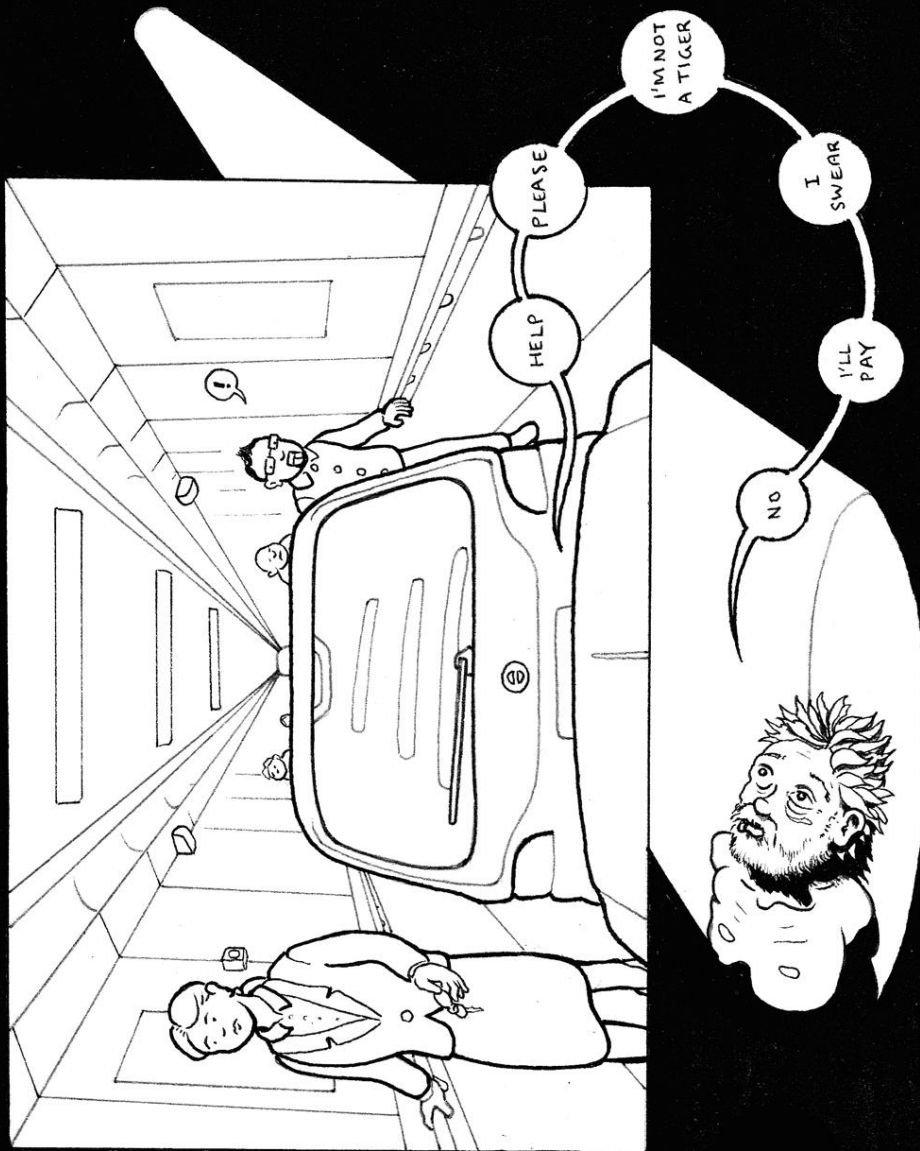


...and dark

until...

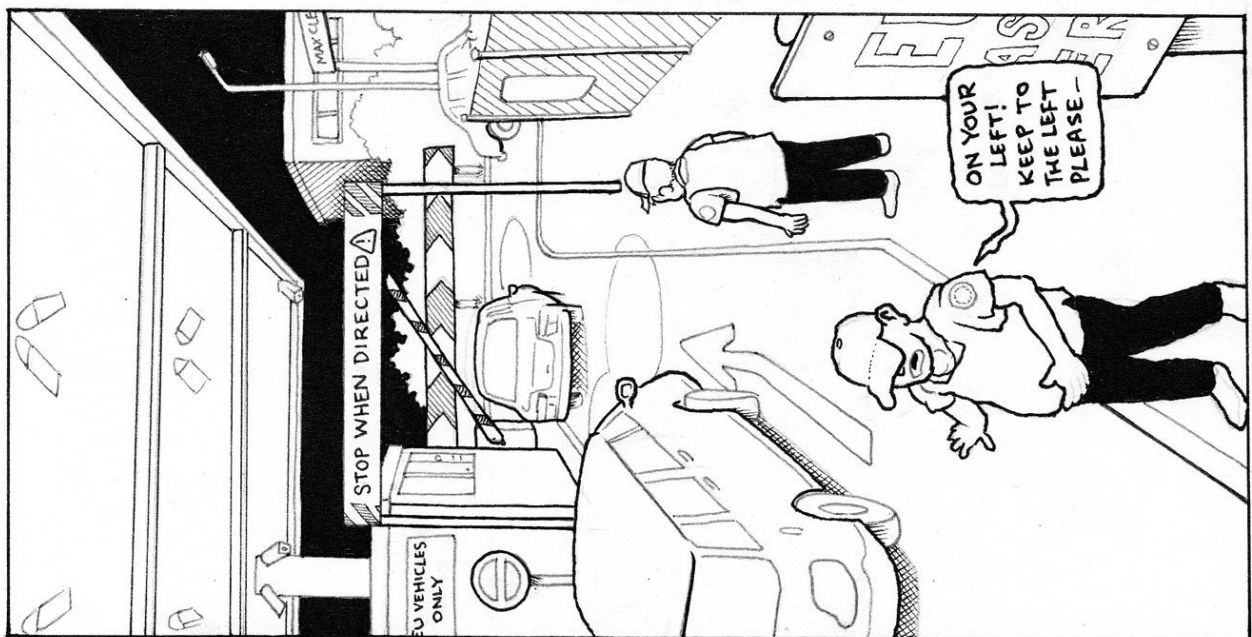
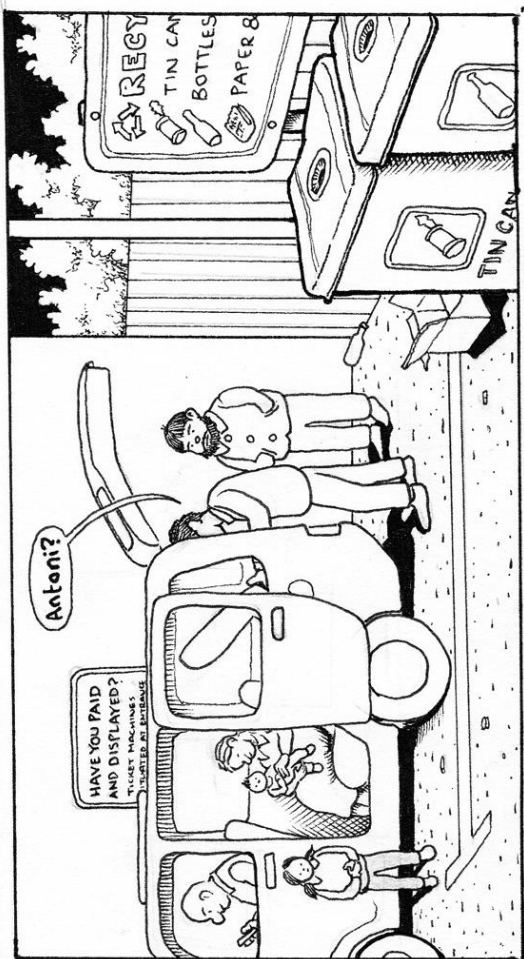


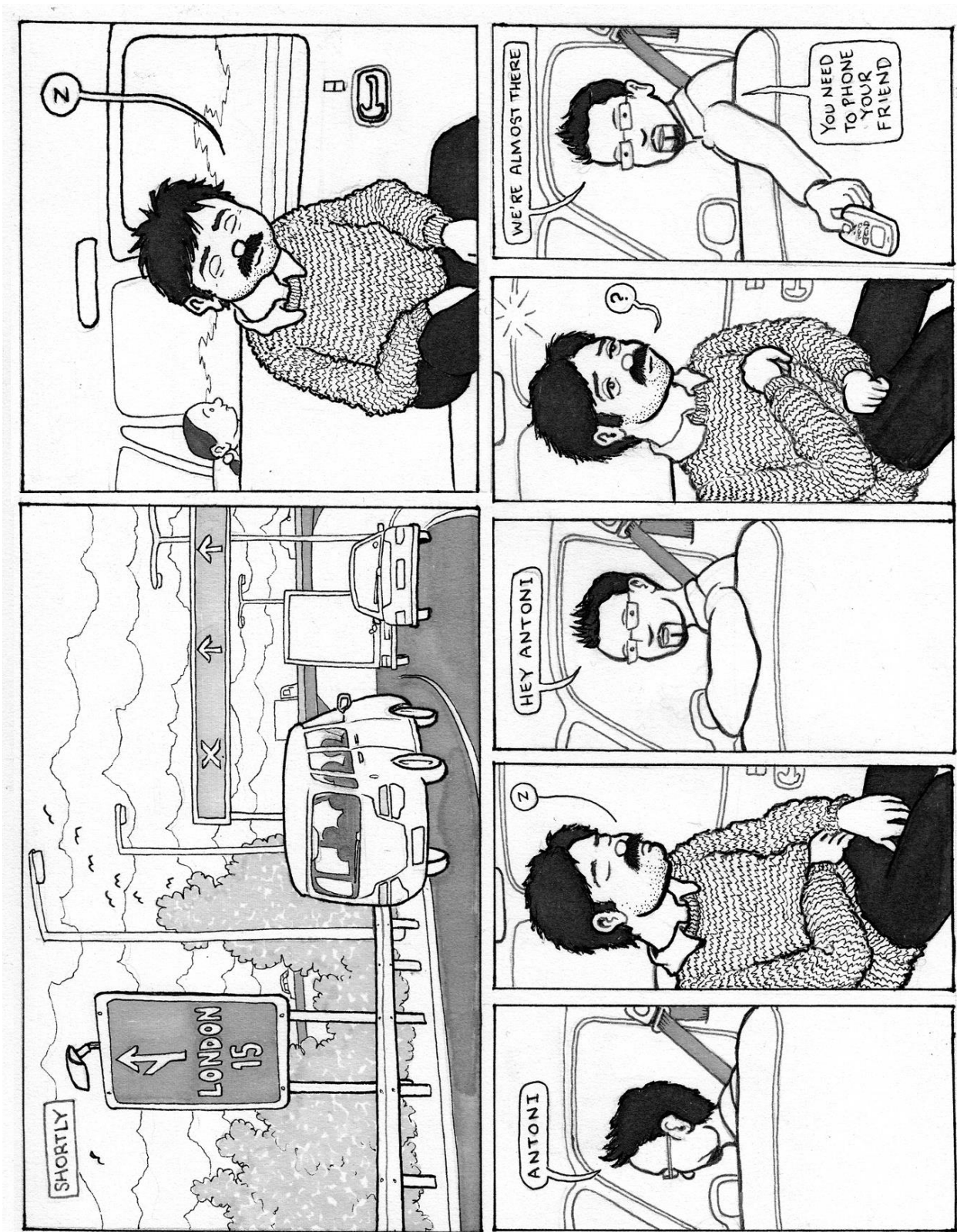




clunk =

Antoni, SHUT UP, just SHUT UP
We are almost there but you
HAVE to BE QUIET now — OK?





Antoni arrives in an overcast and polluted London having surreptitiously crossed the English Channel in the trunk of a car. He thinks he has reached his 'metropolitan grail', but everything around him makes him feel alone and alienated. After meeting with his 'friend', he knows that he needs to register with the authorities as an asylum-seeker as soon as possible, and that even this would be a bitter-sweet prospect for it would mean waiting around for years while he lives on state handouts when he would rather be earning, providing and contributing. Wracked by traumatic memories of the destruction of his homeland in the civil war that ended in 2009, the loss of his loved ones in the Vanni in north east Sri Lanka, detention, torture, and the mental and physical exhaustion of travelling thousands of miles under a fake identity away from surviving members of his family, he sinks into an armchair in a terraced house to reconcile with his new life alone. So begins Antoni's existence as a refugee in London in *Memories of the Vanni*.

Telling such stories about the trials and tribulations of migrants and refugees, and their experience of conflict, violence, displacement and as racial Others in foreign lands is a well-rehearsed one in anthropology. What is less common is their telling through sequential imagery, through condensing multiple real-life stories into a visual narrative that can come alive as a graphic novel.

Sketches and illustrations have had a long history in ethnographic fieldwork, but when it came to their representation, they were largely relegated to the assumed superiority of the written text. Literally in the margins, they were cast off as a peripheral activity not worthy of academic contemplation (Ramos 2009). Manual drawings have suffered a double degradation in that they were more often than not seen as secondary to the immediacy of recording technologies as with photography

and audio-visual media (Causey 2017: 31-38) that themselves have dominated the focus of visual anthropology.

In the current era, however, growing interest has been developing in the potential to conduct and represent ethnographic fieldwork through drawings (e.g. Colloredo-Mansfield 1993, Alfonso *et al.* 2004, Hendrickson 2008, Ramos 2009, Taussig 2011, Kuschnir 2011, Ballard 2013, Johnson *et al* 2012, Causey 2017, Van Wolputte 2017) and more recently, with respect to painting (Bray 2015). Anthropologists among other scholars have begun to highlight their capacity for slow, sensitive and sentient role in perceiving and analysing the field. They enable another means with which to explore the subjective and partial accounts of fieldwork as part of the process of thinking through what is observed and felt. This has, to some extent, levelled out the power dynamics between researcher and researched particularly when the latter is able to see the sketches, and invited to comment or even contribute to the artworks.

The case here goes beyond the idea of the ‘artist-ethnographer’ in the field (Causey 2017: 10) to incorporate a more collaborative mode of production *and* representation as is apparent in some of the graphic novels that have been produced based on ethnography.¹ The illustrations are not then the outcome of observations and reflections in the field so as to enable the researcher ‘to perceive more or see more deeply’ (Causey 2011: 38), but has another register of communication where it has the potential to enable others to perceive more or see more deeply (see Hendrickson 2008, Bray 2015).

In reflecting on this ‘graphic narrative turn’, we advance two main propositions. First, we inscribe drawing into the ‘writing of cultures’ (see Marcus

2012). But in this case, rather than drawing as a perceptive tool for recording scenes in fieldwork, we extend it to a representational practice where image and word can have a deep, intricate and equivalent entanglement with each other (Ingold 2011, Newmann 1998, Castillo and Roy 2012). They are not merely illustrations or explanations for one another but can have synchronous affective intensities.

This leads to our second proposal: with such a two-way method concerned with ethnographic impressions and their representations, we interrogate assumptions about truth and fiction in what we describe as the ‘ethno-graphic novel’. This is less the ethnographic novel as with Tobias Hecht’s (2006) fiction based on fieldwork among homeless youth in northeast Brazil, but where fictionalised sequences of words and images tell tales siphoned from the material gathered during ethnography.² As communication and feedback from research participants is integral to its dialogical development, we will revisit arguments about the partiality and historicity of texts as collated in the seminal edition, *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) to an earlier period in anthropology from the 1950s where ethnographic filmmakers were making similar proposals about questioning the hegemony and indeed fallacy of objective representations. The ethno-graphic novel becomes one other outlet for anthropological research to add to the more experimental forms that have appeared over the last few decades seeking to provide a more subjective, self-reflexive and interactive method for the anthropological endeavour. Following the filmmaker, Jean Rouch, on *cinéma vérité*, we propose a theory and practice called *vérités graphiques* (literally, graphic realities). This representational practice alludes to the collaborative and interactive engagement with participants’ contributions and views, and their distillation and fictionalisation through sequential art. As we demonstrate below, it both borrows from Rouch and

departs from it along a truth-fiction spectrum that further interrogates the presumed objectivity of what is seen, experienced, co-created and revealed.

‘Imageword’ Anthropology

As a form of line-making or a ‘parliament of lines’ in Tim Ingold’s terms (2011: 5), graphic narratives add another strand to ‘graphic anthropology’. The representational practice goes beyond the uses of drawing in fieldwork alone, to explore how it might be combined with story-making to create a document in which the visual is then in active and sequential engagement with the verbal. Accompanying text might be distilled or even abandoned to the primacy of the image in the making of the ethnographic novel.³ There is then a movement from the dependency of text to create *context for imagery* to text as an *integral part of imagery*.

Due to the fusion of visuals and text, the graphic novel creates a relatively new medium for literacy (Bucher and Manning 2004). As David Carrier notes with respect to comic books, there is a ‘verbal-visual interdependence’ in sequential art (2000: 26). Words and images are ‘read’ in simultaneity. Thierry Groensteen prefers to see the relationship in terms of metaphors of multiplicity: one where the story does not read continuously as one might find in a textual book, but space and time become discontinuous and irreducible to a linear reading. This, he argues, is the ‘foundation of the medium’ (2007: 9), a foundation that is steeped in diversity rather than grounded in coherence.

Such observations apply as much to the ‘imagewords’ (Fleckenstein 2003) of graphic novels as they do to the larger genre of comic books. Donna E. Alvermann

and Margaret C. Hagood (2000) argue that because we are living in a multi-media world, we need to learn new ways of doing things, and this is particularly true with regards to media literacy. The graphic novel rises to that challenge (Schwarz 2002, Weiner 2003, Wolk 2007). It enables a means to highlight the potentials of verbalised illustrations to not only describe peoples' experiences and recollections, but also to go into and depict difficult areas of research as one might find in the midst of violence, torture, trauma, and dealing with state bureaucracies as a detainee or asylum-seeker without compromising any particular person's identities or safety. Ethno-racial particularities are schematised with the bareness of line-based drawings. The technique can anonymise them and their experiences; and simultaneously humanise them as 'selves' acting somewhat to counter the exotification of ethno-racial difference. The accessibility of sequential art means that they can start conversations, comments and suggestions for other ideas from a range of people including research participants (Atkins 2013: 14). Even though not without limitations, imageword anthropology such as this can then serve multiple purposes: it can become a tool for pursuing fieldwork, explore inaccessible areas of research, provide a relatively accessible multi-layered platform for participant's feedback, and become a means of communicating ethnographically informed practice and knowledge to wider audiences.

The Ethno-Graphic Novel

Over the past thirty years, graphic novels have become a popular medium of literature for political and conflict-related narratives. Notable examples include *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (1986), a satire of Nazi rule and racial oppression, *Palestine* by

Joe Sacco (1993) on the political turbulence in the region in the 1990s, and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2003) about living in a post-revolutionary and oppressive Iranian context along with the war with Iraq from 1980-88. The *ethno-graphic* novel considered here is fictional but reliant upon ethnographic fieldwork combined with research participants' feedback on the sketches in progress. It is about visualising stories based on long-term, interactive and qualitative fieldwork rather than from the storywriter's or artist's imagination alone. It involves transmitting a spinal narrative developed from the many narratives of ethnographic fieldwork. It is often collaborative between producers and research participants. If the ethnographer him/herself is not the illustrator, it entails working closely with an illustrator in order to execute the story for wider dissemination. In an ideal world, this illustrator would come from the context in question. In the real world, this venture is not always possible – a point made even more piquant when considering what might be called 'contexts in crisis', as with instances when the struggle for survival becomes more pressing for the subjects of the research.

Multiple Journeys

Memories of the Vanni tackles sensitive and personal experiences of conflict, torture, loss, displacement, cultural identity, transnational migration, and the British asylum procedures, in a narrative form based on a fictionalised family. Simultaneously, the fictional becomes another way of exploring realities (see Rouch 2003b, Ingold and Hallam 2007, Taussig 2011). In the course of developing it, multiple methodologies were deployed. Some of the 'stories' were collated through Benjamin Dix' fieldwork using journal entries and photography in the Vanni when he was working as a United

Nations (UN) operative in Sri Lanka from 2004-2008. Other narratives were collected from later fieldwork with focus groups and semi-structured, structured and repeat interviews between 2012-2014 in London, Zurich and Chennai in south India after Tamil refugees had migrated from Sri Lanka. This entailed listening to survivors' experiences in a combination of English and Tamil. On top of three focus groups each with 10-33 participants, 20 male and female asylum-seekers were interviewed based in the three cities. Their ages ranged from their mid-20's to their mid-30's.

The interviews were conducted less to know *about* people and their lives but, in an adaptation of Trinh T. Minh-Ha's terms to 'speak nearby' (cited in Chen 1992: 82), the intention was to 'know nearby'. There was little intention to intrude or collate extensive data about peoples' lives particularly for subjects that they felt reserved or awkward about discussing. Rather the aim was to provide a safe space where they could talk comfortably about any aspect of their emotional and physical journeys and experiences.

In conjunction with the illustrator, Lindsay Pollock, some of the collated narratives were condensed into a fictionalised storyboard for the ethno-graphic novel. While access to the Vanni was not possible due to security concerns from 2008, Pollock drew upon Dix' photographs and accounts of his time there. Some of the more violent sections of the war in the work were drawn from the media and in particular the documentary film, *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* (2014, dir. Callum Macrae), which itself contained mobile phone footage contributed by those who went through the civil war, and which Pollock had studied scene by scene. An additional visit to Tamil Nadu in south India in 2012 enabled a closer appreciation of people living in a similar tropical and coastal environment through a combined approach of interviews, drawings and photography. Wherever possible,

Pollock's sketches were shown to research participants in person or via Skype so as their feedback could be included in the developing graphic narratives. Research participants' approval was particularly important owing to the sensitive material covered including experiences of violence. As we shall see below, for some participants, the ethno-graphic novel became both a creative and therapeutic outlet.

Numerous characterisations and sequences were worked out over a period of two years that had to be whittled down to a simple yet compelling story of people affected by the violence. The final arc of the main narrative centred on Antoni and his family during the culminating months of military incursions and shelling of the Vanni in 2009, and was bookended with a focus on his migration to, and life in a foreign land as an asylum-seeker.

Truth-Fiction in Action

Through flashbacks in the ethno-graphic novel, we learn that Antoni is from a small fishing village on the east coast of the Vanni. His household unit consists of six members: Antoni and his wife, Rajini, their children, Michael and Theepa, Antoni's mother, Appama, and Rajini's younger sister, Priya (Figure 2).



Figure 2.

Antoni is a down-to-earth Christian, family man. He earns enough income from fishing to feed his family and earns extra money from selling any superfluous fish in the market in Kilinochchi town. Rajini, his wife, is from a higher caste Hindu background from the city of Jaffna and had moved to the fishing village after marrying Antoni. Largely down to her schooling, she is a source of strength and support, and often makes the more logical decisions. Priya came from Jaffna to help Antoni's family after the devastating tsunami of 2004. Antoni's mother, Appama, is widowed from the riots in 1983 between the Sinhalese mobs and the Tamil community in the south of the island, known as Black July when thousands of Tamil

people were killed in mass riots (see Thiranagama, 2013). After the civil war came to a brutal end, Antoni ends up in Britain as an asylum-seeker (Figure 3), with his wife, Rajini, and one child, Theepa, remaining as refugees in Chennai, India.



Figure 3.

Through Antoni's recollections to his lawyer, the sequential art follow his family through a series of forced displacements in the Vanni, as the Sri Lankan army clears villages through aerial bombardment and artillery attacks and the Tamil communities are herded into an ever-shrinking space controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, otherwise known as the Tamil Tigers). The tail end of the civil war in 2008 and 2009 saw intensive attacks on civilians and makeshift hospitals marked with the International Red Cross, and the death and disappearance of between an estimated figure of between 75,000 and 146,679 people (ICG 2010: 6, Harrison 2012). Rather than stay on under the rule of Mahinda Rajapaksa's hawkish government, the United People's Freedom Alliance (2005-15), many survivors who were in a position to do so, migrated overseas particularly to India, Australia, Canada and countries in Europe.

Antoni's journey from Sri Lanka to London, via Chennai is based on the experiences of three London-based research contributors who came to join earlier Tamil migrants, some of which is illustrated in the opening panels of this article. All three had to leave the younger and weaker members of their families behind after they made the decision to traverse the continents to seek asylum in Europe, hoping to bring them later. The men made the journey with smugglers that charged anywhere between £12,000 (\$15,000) to £20,000 (\$25,000) per person for documentation and travel arrangements. As another of the interlocutors, Daniel, recalled in his interview in 2013:

My uncle in Canada paid for the trip and now I have to work to pay him back. I also have to send money for my Amma [mother] and Appa [father] in Sri

Lanka and my wife and children in Chennai. This is now the real stress to my life. I am getting small money every week and just waiting and waiting for the decision to be made if I get asylum here. Then I will have to find good job to pay all the things [sic].

This relatively huge sum of money to smugglers needs to be repaid to the relatives and money lenders after arrival at their destination yet they are not entitled to work. People like Antoni, therefore, would find themselves in great financial debt on arrival that further adds to their sense of alienation and duress when in Britain.

Conversations between those left in India were an essential lifeline even though their distance and the difficulties of navigating financial burdens and state regulations often led to more despair once the conversation was over. A research contributor, who we have called Kandiah, recalled in his interview:

I speak to my wife on Skype every day. It's so good to see her and to see my children. We are always discussing the situation [his asylum in UK and their security in Chennai]. It's really hard to always talk about the hardships but I cannot remember when we had happy times to speak...That is sad, isn't it? I need to talk with my family every day but I feel so bad afterwards. That's when I feel really sad and alone.

Kandiah's contradictory feelings are evoked in the ethno-graphic novel through the stark contrast between on the one hand, the conviviality afforded by Antoni's Skype conversation with his wife and child in Chennai, and, on the other, the dreary starkness of a cold and foreign environment characterised by endless bureaucracy, the inability to work, and the isolation of living alone in state-sponsored accommodation while waiting for news about asylum claims (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

Notoriously, the final months of the civil war in Sri Lanka were marked by the

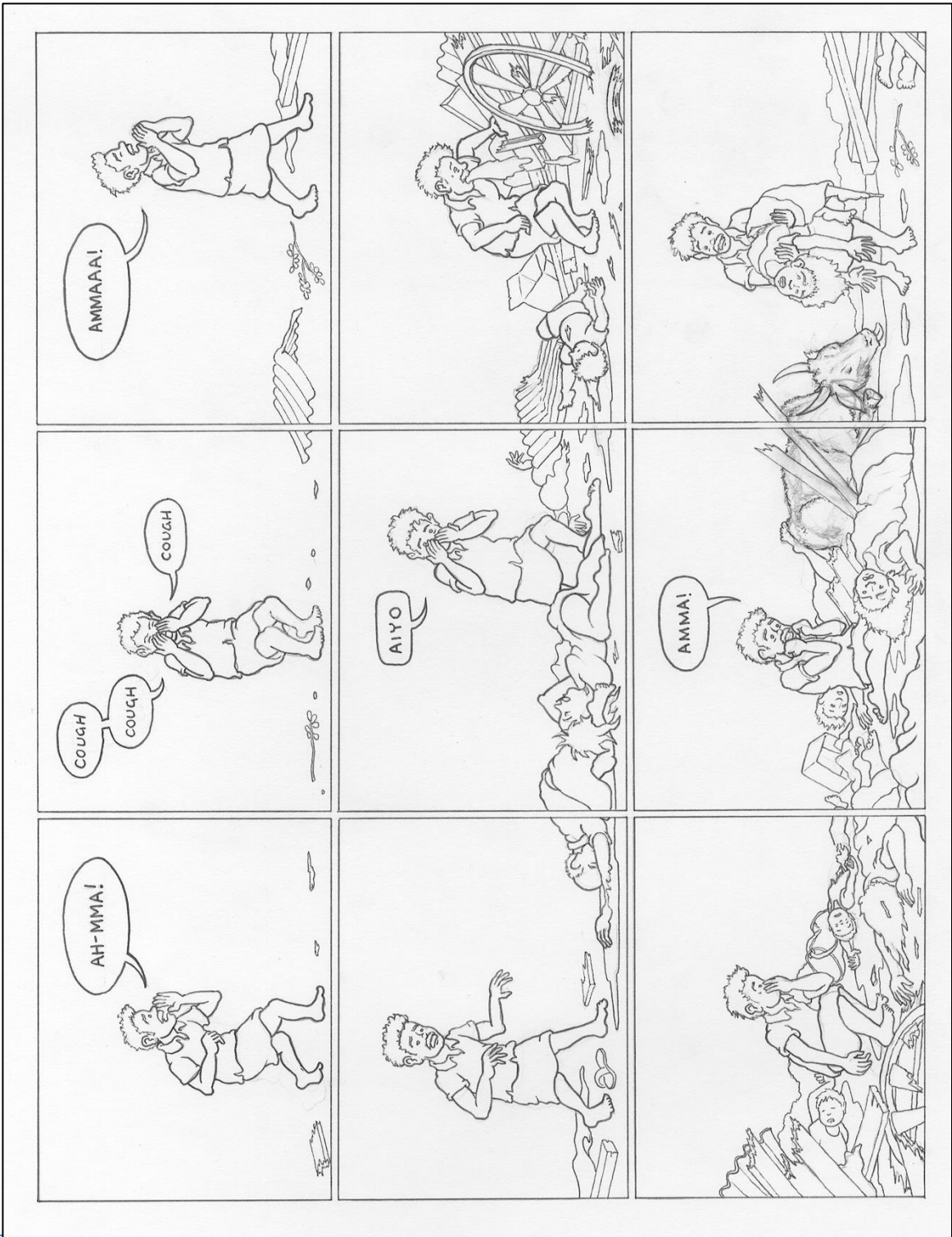
designation of a series of three 'no fire zones': first a 35.5 km² zone on 21st January 2009, and second a 14 km² strip on an eastern isthmus on 12th February 2009 (UNSG 2011). The isthmus was later divided again by more shelling such that survivors on one side had to surrender themselves to the Sri Lankan army, and tens of thousands of others on the other side were compressed into a final 'no fire zone' of 2 km² on 8th May 2009 (UNSG 2011) centring on Mullivaikkal. People headed towards the designated 'no fire zone' hoping for some sense of calm, but effectively ended up in a trap only to be bombarded again from the air, sea and land in this supposed sanctuary (ICG 2010).

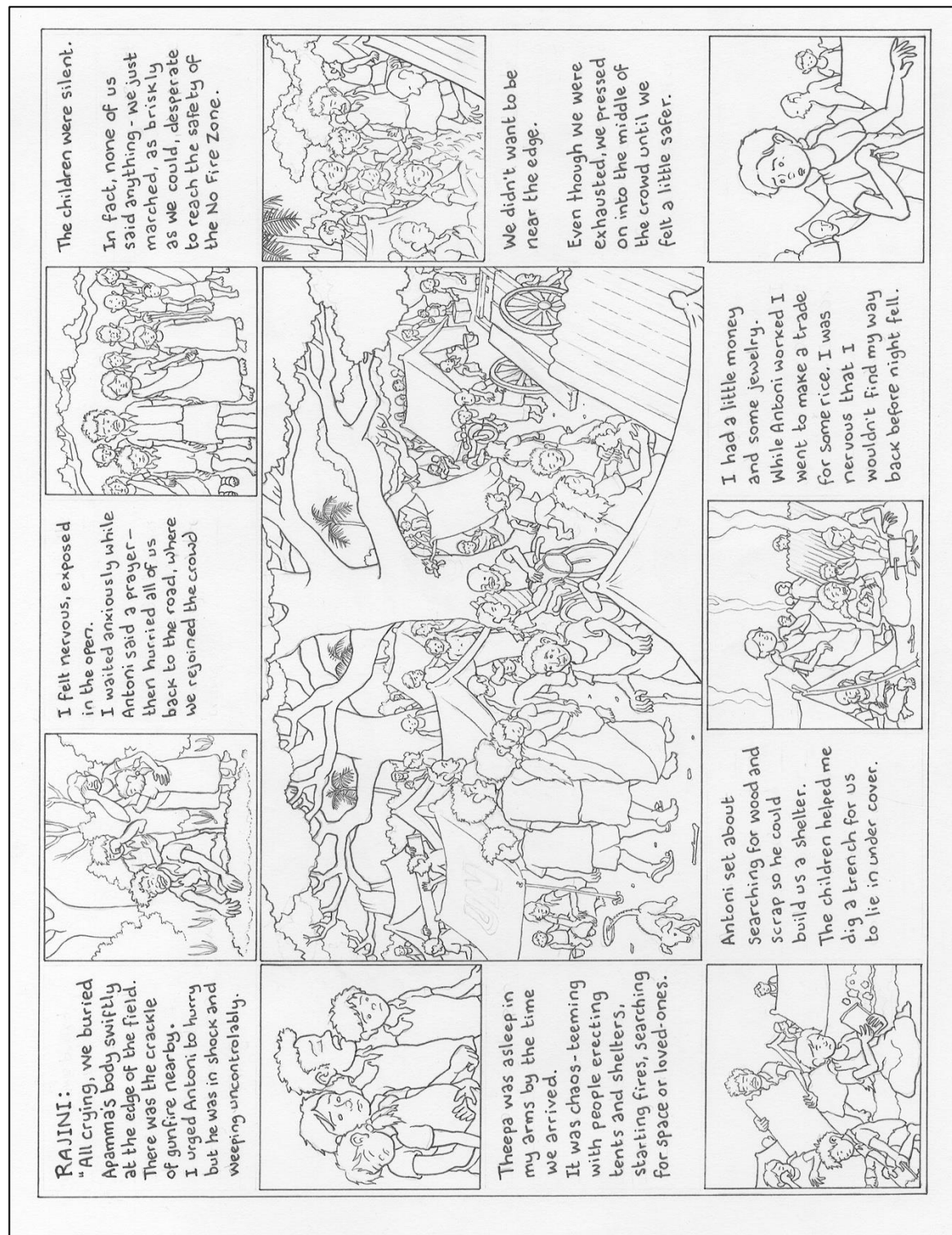
The ethno-graphic narrative highlights the material and physical loss that people experience through the violence. These episodes were sourced from participants retelling their experiences of what seemed like endless shelling as they tried to escape the ring of encircling terror. Raja in his interview recalled a poignant incident about having to abandon his dying mother when they were trying to run away from the shelling:

Everyone was walking to Puthukkudiyiruppu [PTK]. We were too tired from the walking and not eating. Amma was walking too slowly so we put her on the cart so she could rest. We were all walking with the cart but my smallest daughter got something in her foot and we stopped. I saw she had cut it and my wife took time to bandage it. When we walking again the cart was far in front. We were trying to catch it when it [explosion] happened. I remember the big sound and then quiet. My wife and me were on our backs and shouting for our daughter but my ears were too loud inside after the blast. We found her, but I was running to my Amma but there was crowd and everybody was shouting. But I remember I found her....I saw her and I felt so bad 'cos I felt

unwell. I carried her body but my wife was shouting at me to run as more shells can come...I had to leave her there by the road [sic].

The double blow of losing his mother and the fact that he could not even arrange a proper burial was too much to bear. Raja's contribution was carried into the story when depicting chaos in the aftermath of bombarded bodies among whom Antoni finds his mother (Figure 6). Mortified, Antoni picks her up and walks into the fields with her languid body. Rajini runs after him, imploring him to leave her and to run so as to escape the blight of more shelling (Figure 7). As revealed by several participants, a common tactic for the Sri Lankan army was to bomb one place and then return to bomb it again as people come to tend to the bodies and help any survivors. After a very quick burial, Antoni reluctantly leaves his mother. He continues to silently grieve as he is haunted by his memories. Even when the remaining family reach the government designated 'no fire zone', Antoni remains aloof from everyone else, staring blankly into the fire that they had built to keep warm outside their makeshift tent. Eventually, Antoni falls into a restive sleep, 'sleep-that-wasn't-really-sleep', only to be woken up to even more shelling from the sky in what they had been led to believe was a humanitarian sanctuary.





Figures 6 and 7.

Another research participant, Chandan, vividly recalled the relentless bombardment:

The shelling happened at night time a lot. We were always sleeping close as there was little room inside and it was raining outside. When the shelling started, we would all cry and hold us together. We felt safer if we together. Every night I thinking this is last night. But every morning we start again. I got very old in those months. Even now I remember every night when I am in bed. I cannot forget that time [sic].

Chandan's recollections filter into the ethno-graphic novel where people are huddled together amidst the terror that surround them, their eyes almost coming out of their sockets, and holding on to each other for dear life with no protection other than each other's arms and a flimsy make-do tent (Figures 8 and 9). It is at this point that Antoni's family are hit by shrapnel from a bomb in the 'no fire zone' – a term that is ironic if it was not so dreadful. Most of them survive under the rubble but later, we learn that their young son, Michael, is no more.

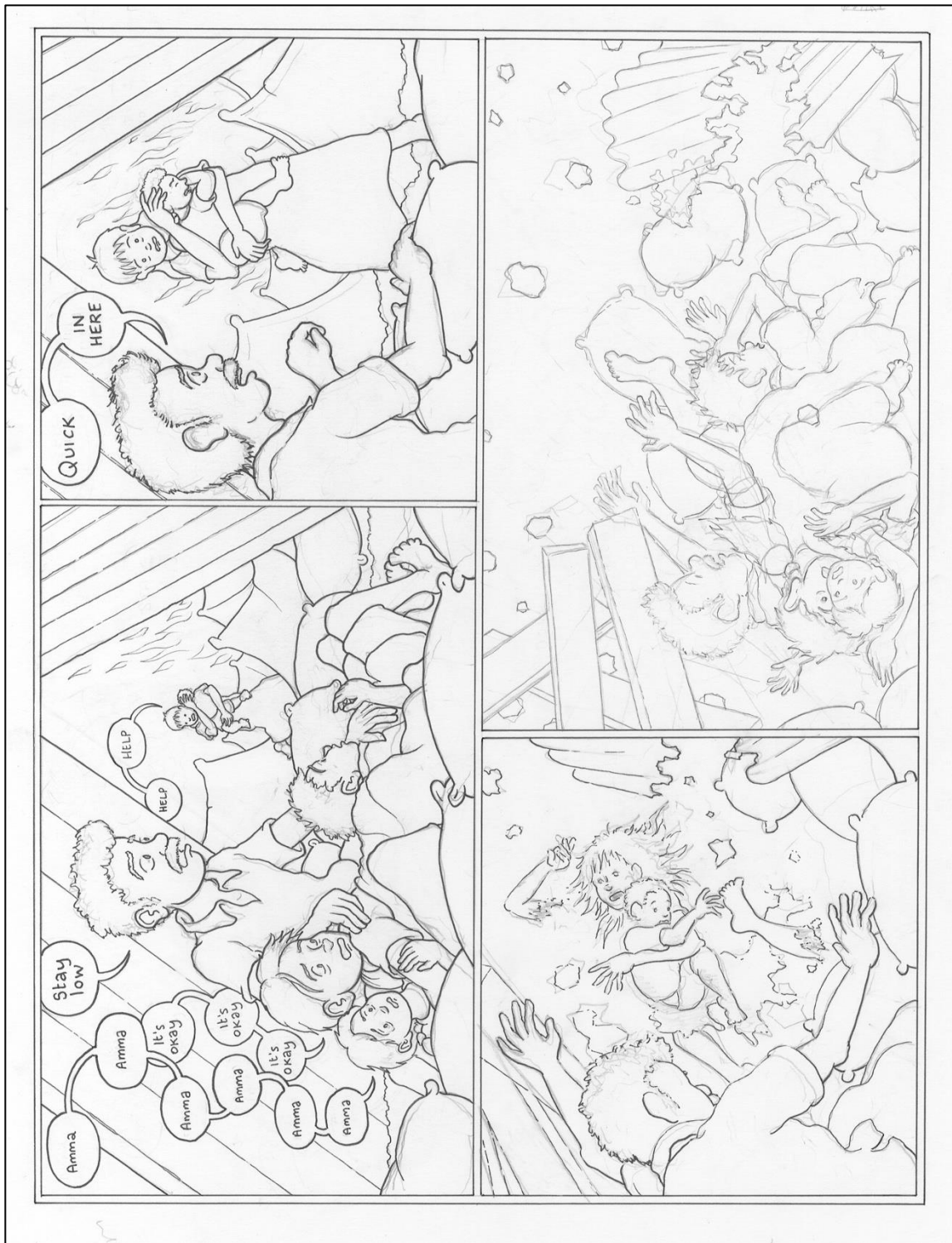


Figure 9.

Another research participant, Seeniar, recalled living with the perennial fear of his family coming to harm:

Paresh [his eldest son] always wanted to explore, he was always like that. When we first got to that place [‘no fire zone’], we were all so scared, but after time Paresh got used to the shelling he would walk off, he was 16. I used to get upset at him ‘cos we needed to be together if anyone got hurt. One time I got angry with him, I hit him hard. He didn’t talk to me for a week. I don’t think I hurt him but he was hurt inside. I’ve seen what those shells do. I not forget that [sic].

Often, children would be hard to keep together in one safe place. Unable to adjust to the intensifying civil war, they would regularly wander off when bombing seemed to have stopped – a parental anxiety that is picked up with the story of Indran in the novel. After Indran scolds his roving son, the boy then stops talking to him. Indran justifies his actions to himself: ‘I think he’s ashamed of himself. Better he be angry and ashamed than dead’ (Figure 10). This line in the sequence was an extension of what Seeniar had reiterated: his comment was embellished to represent the internally conflicted emotions people under siege had to contend with, some of which could not be verbalised but, nevertheless, could not be forgotten. Elsewhere in the novel, Indran reflects: ‘At some point, I stopped keeping track of hours, days or weeks...Deep exhaustion settled over everybody. Hunger gnawed our stomachs. We became thin.’ This is not a direct representation of a comment by any of the participants. Instead, poetic license was taken to conjure up their war-shattered experiences in order to provide nuance and more depth to characters. This was done several times to fill in the ‘empty gaps’ of a storyline but without wanting to diverge in spirit and sentiment from participants’ contributions.

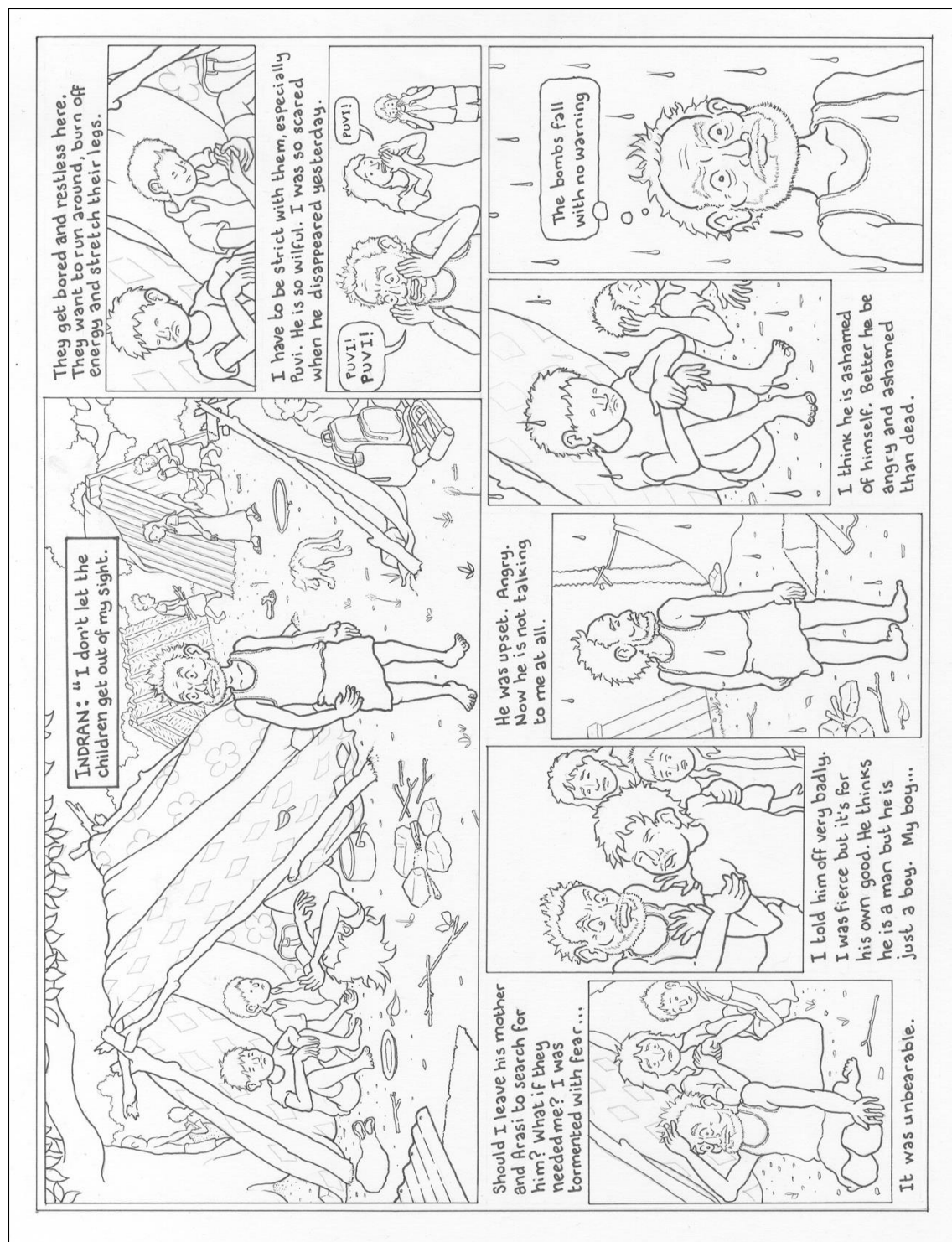


Figure 10.

Capture of survivors by the Sri Lankan army after the conflict was concluded in May 2009 promised no respite from further terror and violence. Aarathi recalled at length

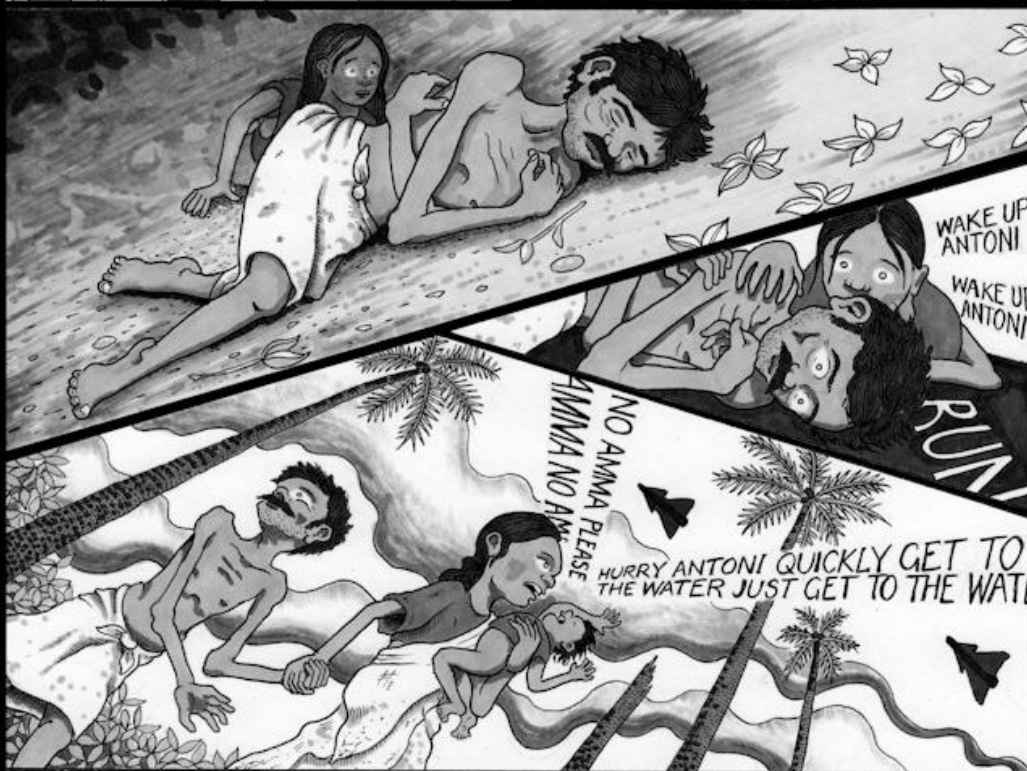
her long journey from the final 'no fire zone' to what the government described as 'rehabilitation camps' for survivors:

The next morning, an army soldier came and we were all asked to follow him. We were made to walk through a lake. The water was up to my neck and it was extremely difficult to move in the water. There was a lady with two children. The children were small and unable to swim or walk. I held one on my shoulders and the lady held the other on hers. There were big tree trunks and branches coming out of the water and the army soldiers would put place wooden planks over them and stand on them in order to monitor us all. Having crossed the lake we continued to walk for a long while. I began to realise that I could smell a very strong smell in that area in respect of the dead bodies. An army soldier stopped us all and a couple of women were taken from our group...

Such recollections are drawn upon for the knife-like memories seeping through Antoni's nightmare in his metropolitan flat. The triangulated and jagged panels of this sequence are placed so to conjure up the felt disorientation and many pains of the period (Figures 11 and 12). In this 'living nightmare', Antoni is so tired and traumatised by the death of his mother that he is unable to move. He is almost dragged across by Rajini holding their yelling child, Theepa, in her other arm. Rajini tells him to take his daughter as they get into the lagoon, for swimming with her would prove to be too difficult. Around them they see floating dead bodies and a man who appears to be drowning caught out by a particularly deep part of the lagoon. All Antoni can say to Theepa as he carried her across the lagoon is to close her eyes while looking back to see how Priya is coping. When they get to dry land, a man

grabs Priya by the head. It is a soldier who forcefully takes her away. Rajini cries after her while Antoni tries to run away pulling his wife along, worried that she too could be taken away. Priya is abducted by soldiers who suspect her of being a Tamil Tiger insurgent, and therefore in their minds, deserving of whatever mental and physical violation they cared to think of.

COMING UP ON THE SHOW WE'LL BE TALKING TO THE MUMS WHO
 TO CLAIM THAT WE SHOULD DO MORE TO PROTECT OUR CHILDREN
 FROM THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF VIDEO GAMES. PLUS LATER
 SPECIAL PREVIEW OF COVERAGE OF THIS SUMMER'S GOLF CH





Figures 11 and 12.

The events as they are laid out in the ethno-graphic novel converge various narrative threads, observations and sentiments that were conveyed during the interviews. They also serve to illustrate the displaced and condensed effect of harrowing memories where different episodes blur into one hazy and anxious muddle. This is made clear in the novel where, in contrast to Antoni's nightmare, Priya was pulled away by government soldiers when they were walking past a barbed wire fence well after they had all crossed the lagoon (Figure 13).



Figure 13.

Ethno-Graphic Elicitation

A key potential in working with this visual-verbal medium (see Taylor 1994) was that sketches for *Memories of the Vanni* could be shown to research participants with relative ease for their views and opinions. Not unlike photo-elicitation (Larson 1988; Harper 2002), the sketches acted like triggers to talk about aspects of participants' experiences, but in this case, also how to improve them. Some participants embellished and even seemed to take ownership of characters and storylines. When seeing some of the fictionalised sketches, Seeniar immediately recognised that they were drawn from his interview, and elaborated:

This shows how it was in those times on the beach but what you have not shown is the water in those bunkers. That was the hardest time for us as we could not sit down. We would stand for many hours in those bunkers with the water up our legs. We all got bad feet from that time. You need to show the water.

His instructions were well-heeded. Seeniar added visceral responses by pointing out details such as the constant itchiness that they had to endure while their feet and calves stood under water as bombs fell around them. As he talked, he got up and physically jumped from one foot to another, likening the sporadic itching on his lower legs and feet to a darting lizard: 'one foot off the hot sand, then the other one down. This is what we did when we were in the water in the bunker'. The panels evoked what Laura Marks (2000) calls a 'haptic visuality' - a visuality that functions like the sense of touch by triggering embodied memories. It was after Seeniar's recollections of the time spent in the bunkers that Pollock redrew the illustrations in order to conjure up the experience of being stuck in dank, mosquito-ridden water for hours on end while peoples' feet in the bunkers itched like hell, as if the raining bombs around

them had shrunk, transmogrified and entered inside their blood stream. There was no respite anywhere (Figures 14 and 15).

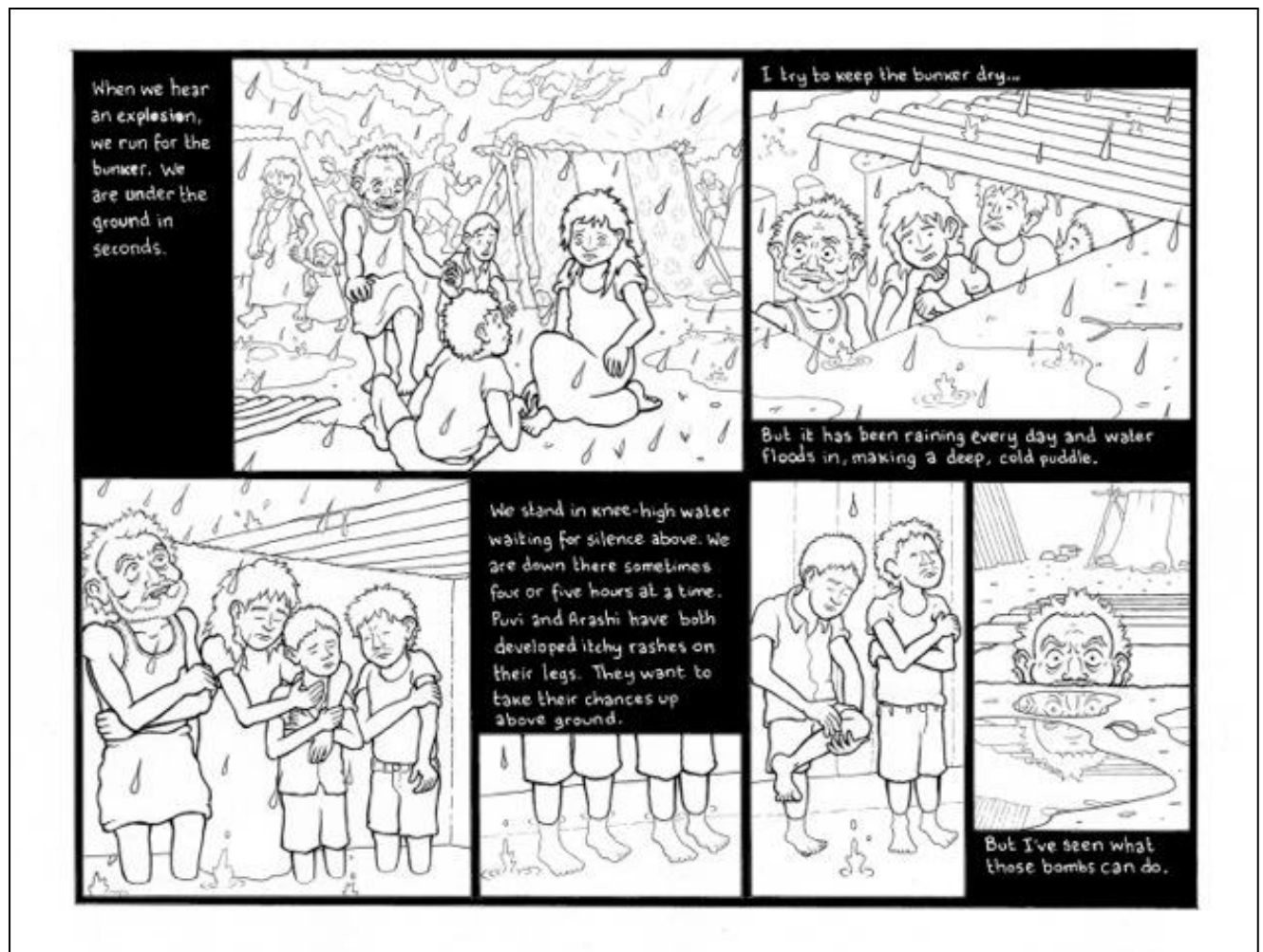


Figure 14.



Figure 15.

On seeing the sketches, Nanditi recalled the mental and physical violations she endured in Manek Farms, inappropriately described as ‘rehabilitation camps’.

Despite her personal ordeals, she responded encouragingly particularly to the scenes surrounding the abduction of Priya as she walked past Sri Lankan soldiers.

Nanditi stated:

I really saw my story in these pages when the girl is caught. You have drawn it perfectly. It is very hard to see these comics of that time as I suffered too much after that. I've not seen cartoon like this before, showing the real life. I feel it is true way to show my story to people. I am happy 'cos you don't see my face and name is changed so it's not me, but it is me and my story.

With this 'cartoon' showing 'real life', Nanditi projected herself into the fictionalised character even though only a part of her actual experience had been represented. The moment of Priya's abduction itself became a prompt for the repeated sexual assaults and torture that Nanditi had to endure over four months after the civil war was concluded in May 2009. With a cash payment from her uncle, she was released from the camp and fled Sri Lanka. Now based in London, and having been granted asylum, she was deeply appreciative of the visual-verbal platform where her remembered experiences were anonymised, fictionalised, yet made incredibly powerful and empowering. As she remarked, they were not *about her* but definitely *her story*.

Another research participant, Dominic, added something that was not anticipated at all. When he saw the sketches, he said: 'Actually I have not seen it like this cartoon before and I like it. We can see inside the war, not where the camera is [sic].' Dominic's suggestion was that the drawing was actually more revealing than the photo-realism associated with a camera (see Sontag 2003) - that is, through drawings, we could 'see inside the war', not just have surface *pictures of the war*. No

doubt, this point owed to an ethnographic familiarity with their lives, the creative possibilities for exploring difficult territories, and the affective intensities that imagewords could (re)create among the research participants.

Vérités Graphiques

In his interview, Joseph compared the violence and torture that he went through with his current status of waiting for asylum in Britain along the following terms:

There are many chapters to this story. For me the most frustrating was when I arrived here in England. The war in Sri Lanka was terrible, but the waiting in England and scared of returning to Sri Lanka is a nightmare. Every Friday I have to sign to receive my asylum money. I cannot survive without that money. But some of my friends were taken at that signing place and sent back to Sri Lanka. If I go back Sri Lanka I will be killed 'cos I've told all my story here against the government [Sri Lanka] and what they did to me [torture]. They will kill me for sure. We all face this problem here 'cos we are scared to tell the real story in case we are sent back and the government finds out [sic].

Joseph's contribution is significant not least for the fact that he himself described his experiences as a story with many chapters. His deep reservations about being identified are all too evident. Moving beyond ethnofiction where the protagonists recreate and play out their lives and aspirations for all to see (Augé 1999, Sjöberg 2008), in this case, there is a pressing need to veil them. This veiling is both in the form of what we have called, distillate fiction – stories distilled from their 'stories'- and

through the line and shadow drawings in the ethno-graphic novel. Once stripped of particular features, the illustrations have the effect of anonymising yet empowering participants who could recognise aspects of their life. As Nanditi said above, she felt it was the ‘true way to show my story to people’. A distillate or reconstructed realism, truth was less about getting to authenticity but appreciating the possibilities to recreate *a sense of authenticity*.

The methodological process of integrating feedback into the making of media and questioning the presumed objectivity of realism recalls Rouch’s practice of shared anthropology (*anthropologie partagée*) and *cinéma vérité* (literally, the truth of cinema). Rouch’s aim was not to become scientifically more objective in recording what he observed or was researching, but rather to acknowledge the subjectivity of his position and to use it to create a cinema that was simultaneously ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ (Henley 2009, Stoller 1992). Rouch deconstructed the filmic medium as a claim to objective representation, and allowed the agency of those filmed to have a more formative part in the final film. In this interactive space, anthropological knowledge was developed from a more personal, collaborative and horizontal perspective framed by shared experiences.

While Rouch developed the idea of *cinéma vérité* to depart from realist documentary film and openly court the dialogic and catalytic effects of film in its making (Stoller 1992, Rouch 2003a, Henley 2009), here we have presented a similar technique of what might be termed *vérités graphiques* or ‘graphic truths’. The ethno-graphic novel is not intended to represent ‘reality’ in an objective sense. On the one hand, the truth or representation is based on the filtering of events and experiences through the subjectivity of individual testimonials and the creative license deployed in working in the graphic medium. On the other, it enables participants and viewer-

readers to 'see the truth' in the schematised and fictionalised representations. The way truth is deployed here is not to refer to a particular series of events, but a generic series of events created through the affective intensities and investments in the medium. Truth here also implies an empathetic ethic that does not objectify or sensationalise particular individuals.

The main narrative sits somewhere between fiction and non-fiction while also interrogating the premises of these seemingly oppositional areas as we now demonstrate with recourse to Rouch's film, *Chronique d'un Été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*, 1961). If we were to replay a classic scene in the film, Rouch sits around a table with the sociologist, Edgar Morin and a mixed group of students discussing topics such as colonialism, racism, and the Algerian war of independence. Rouch, at one point directs Landry's attention to some numbers on Marceline's arms. He asks him and another man of African descent, Raymond, why they think the tattoo is there. They respond in a bewildered state, Raymond assuming perhaps that the numerals might be her telephone number. Marceline dispels the idea and reveals that they were in fact the numbers she was tattooed with when she was incarcerated as a Jew in the concentration camp at Auschwitz during World War II. The deflection effectively moves the discussion on discrimination based on skin colour to that of ethno-religious identity. Stunned silence follows, as if a raw note of truth has been exposed, one that could not have happened without the provocation of the filmmaker-ethnographer. Where we depart from Rouch is to note that such moments of revelation are themselves problematic and fractured. The foundational premises of truth revelation through *cinéma vérité* need further interrogation.

Oral testimonies have been generally understood as a means with which to allow 'survivors to speak for themselves' (Hartman 1996: 192), but numerous research demonstrates that testimony is in fact a co-production or co-construction of a dialogical encounter as we have shown here (see Portelli 1981, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Jackson 2002, Clark 2005, Greenspan and Bolkosky 2006). The basis of 'truth-telling' that Rouch tries to catalyse or provoke through film itself becomes a fractured premise that *vérités graphiques* acknowledges and *cinéma vérité* does not to the same extent. This dissolution and oscillation between testimony and novel we have termed the truth-fiction spectrum. The process enables a shift from an 'objective' and positivist approach – aimed basically at 'representing' the cultural 'Other' – to encompassing more subjective stories on a more horizontal alliance without a fixation on truth-revelation through a directorial lens. The aim here is not so much to hit at or expose hard truths through this approach. Rather, it is to compose condensed stories from a distillate of memories of violence and displacement that research contributors recognise as true for the fact that they are simultaneously anonymising and empowering in a refractive sense.

Our approach also shows a debt to feminist studies. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise continue the critique of objective knowledge by proposing 'feminist fractured foundationalism' (2005: 2) as a means with which to undermine the assumed objectivity of social life history and facts. With fractured foundationalism, we are able to appreciate the positional and social constructedness of narratives about events from a variety of perspectives as well as accept that even foundational frames or testimonial truths need to be unpacked.

In this refractive light, we can see that Rouch's intervention in the café scene around the table went a considerable way to creating an ultimate truth even while he

might rail against it with his aspirations for *cinéma vérité*. As Trinh T. Minh-ha wrote on *cinéma vérité*: ‘though the filmmaker’s perception may readily be admitted as being unavoidably personal, the objectiveness of the reality of what is seen and represented remains unchallenged’ (2012: 35, see Galman 2009: 214). Taking her critique on board, we proceed on the basis not of a truth-fiction dialectic between constitutive end-points, but a truth-fiction spectrum where each element is fractured and momentarily dissolves into each other like the fluidity of liquid light. This is not a case of quarrying a deeper truth through media interactions with the subjects of research, but multi-layered truths created by the input and investments of the subject-participants of research at various stages of development of the ethno-graphic novel. Effectively, it conjures up in Trinh’s terms, a representational practice that shows and speaks *nearby* and not *about*.

Engaging and Engaged Platforms

The research participants’ contributions may be edited and/or embellished in the ethno-graphic novel, but there remain several potentials with *vérités graphiques*. Aside from the ability to retain the anonymity and protection of research participants, it was possible to highlight the compelling recollections of their experiences where viewer-readers could also ‘see’ and empathise with representations of their stories. It enabled possibilities for a collaborative approach with participants who could interpret the sequential art and offer further feedback and advice on its content and further development. The visual-verbal medium permitted entry points to areas that were difficult to access or recall. It also enabled the potential to foster a ‘sympathetic imagination’ (Salgado 2007) across visible, social and other demarcations that can

create new meanings - a horizontal way of seeing, feeling and thinking about one's relationship with oneself, others, and with society in general (see De Mel 2013).

Drawing upon Michael Galchinsky's (2012) observations on graphic novels in general, *vérités graphiques* as a processual and interactive representational practice can add to the formation of a compelling and engaging 'human rights culture'. While we question Galchinsky's holistic conception of culture in this term (see Clifford 1988), we note that ethnographically informed stories on topics to do with violence, oppression, forcible displacement and asylum-seeking can go to play a significant role in creative advocacy. Simultaneously truth and fiction, more awareness can be raised through affective registers that also impart further insights and knowledge. *Memories of the Vanni* provides another way of appreciating and understanding experiences of Sri Lanka's civil war, ethno-racial rivalries, internal and international displacement, war crimes, unlawful detention and torture, and the protracted plight of asylum-seekers. We end with the views of a conflict survivor who now lives in Britain that made the project all the more worthwhile: 'I am happy to see an emotional yet honest publication that gives an insight into Vanni. Thank you for such a meaningful and in-depth creation'.

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¹ See, for instance, Galman (2009) and Hamdy and Nye (2016). The former involved research participants in US teacher education centres who contributed drawings that were then analysed by the researcher. The latter involved a collaborative team that produced a graphic novel based on fieldwork in Egypt and USA.

² See also other novels written by anthropologists such as Gardner (1996), Varzi (2015) and earlier fictionalised works such as Bohannan aka Bowen (1964).

³ On other anthropologically informed graphic novels, see Nicola Streeten's work that is largely based on her own experiences; <http://home.btconnect.com/nicolastreeten/indexns12.htm>; Graphic Medicine's series to widely communicate medical issues <http://www.graphicmedicine.org/book-series/>; the blogs on graphic adventures in anthropology <http://www.utpteachingculture.com/tag/graphic-adventures-in-anthropology/> and the series with the University of Toronto Press, *ethnoGRAPHIC*, the PhD and graphic novel by Michael Atkins (2013) on gay cultures in Manchester, the 'anthrocomics' produced by Aleksandra Bartoszko, Anne Birgitte Leseth and Marcin Pnomarew at Oslo University College <https://anthrocomics.wordpress.com/> and the work at the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography and articles available online: <http://imaginativeethnography.org/imaginings/comics/making-graphic-novels-as-a-creative-practice-in-anthropology/>